

The Doctrine of Justification

Though we must be careful of over-pressing what is known as the *ordu salutis* (“order of salvation”) often employed by systematic theologians,¹ it can nevertheless be a helpful guide to understanding the various aspects of God’s “so great a salvation.”

To recap, we have already looked at:

- Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Election
- Effectual Calling
- Regeneration

The next “link” in the unbreakable chain of salvation is justification:

“Now we know that for those who love God, all things are working together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, these He also predestined to be conformed into the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined, these He also called; and those whom He called, these He also justified; and those whom He justified, these He also glorified.” (Rom. 8:28-30).

Now before we delve into the Word of God to unpack the what, the why, and the how of justification, it may be important to consider just how important this doctrine is.

The great reformer Martin Luther called justification “the article upon which the church stands or falls.”² For Luther the issue of justification touches not merely the church’s “well-being” (*bene esse*), but the church’s very “being” or essence (*esse*). Without this doctrine the church falls; she collapses into ruin. She ceases

¹ For further reading, see, for example “The Question of the Order of Salvation” in Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

² *Articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.

to be a true church. Though every other article of historic Christian faith remains intact – if this one (*sola fide*) is lost, the church is lost with it.³

Again, Luther stresses the paramount importance of this doctrine to the life and existence of the church:

This doctrine is the head and the cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour.⁴

Whoever departs from the article of justification does not know God and is an idolater...For when this article has been taken away, nothing remains but error, hypocrisy, godlessness, and idolatry, although it may seem to be the height of truth, worship of God, holiness, etc.⁵

The article is the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines; it preserves and governs all church doctrine and raises up our conscience before God. Without this article the world is utter death and darkness.⁶

If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time. And all the people of the world who do not hold to this justification are either Jews or Turks or papists or heretics; for there is no middle ground between these two righteousnesses: the active one of the Law and the passive one that comes from Christ. Therefore the man who strays from Christian righteousness must relapse into the active one, that is, since he has lost Christ he must put his confidence in his own works.⁷

Calvin, a little later, called justification the “hinge” upon which everything turns:

³ From R.C. Sproul's excellent introduction to Francis Turretin's book on Justification (P & R, 2004), vii.

⁴ Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, 3 vols., ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 2:704.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 703.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The doctrine of justification is the principle ground on which religion must be supported, so it requires greater care and attention. For unless you understand first of all what your position is before God, and what the judgement is which He passes on you, you have no foundation on which your salvation can be laid, or on which piety towards God can be reared.⁸

Packer's comparison of justification by faith to Atlas is apt:

The doctrine of justification is like Atlas: it bears a world on its shoulders, the entire evangelical knowledge of saving grace. The doctrines of election, of effectual calling, regeneration, and repentance, of prayer, of the church, the ministry, and the sacraments, have all to be interpreted and understood in the light of justification by faith. When justification falls, all true knowledge of the grace of God in human life falls with it, and then, as Luther said, the church itself falls. When Atlas falls, everything that rested on his shoulders comes crashing down too.⁹

As Sproul notes:

For Luther the essence of the gospel – the good news of the gospel – is that the merit and righteousness we need to be justified is not found in us, even by the help of grace. It is found apart from us – it is a righteousness *extra nos* – a righteousness that properly belongs to Christ Himself – which righteousness is imputed by faith. Take away that imputation and you leave me helpless in my sin.¹⁰

Church history testifies that studied ambiguity is the refuge of the heretic.¹¹ If this is so, then we must exact precision in our study of this essential doctrine, for

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Henry Beveridge (1845; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:37.

⁹ J.I. Packer, "Introductory Essay," in James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of Its History in the Church, and of Its Exposition from Scripture* (1867; repr. London: Banner of Truth, 1961).

¹⁰ See Francis Turretin, *Justification*, ed. By James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2004), x-xi.

¹¹ Sproul, "Introduction", xviii.

being vague or general or politically correct has eternal and damning consequences.

The Foundation: God's Holy Character

Job, truly one of the most honorable and holy people to have ever lived, in a state of perplexity famously asked perhaps one of the most important questions one could ever raise: “How can a man be righteous before God?” (Job 9:2)

Of course, this question makes no sense, and is even unnecessary unless we first have a biblical understanding of both the nature of God and the nature of man.

As we have already studied at great length the nature and attributes of God, it suffices us for the sake of brevity to remember that God is, by very nature and in every attribute, “holy, holy, holy” (Isa. 6:3).

- First, God is holy existentially: He is totally “other than,” and infinitely “separate from,” His creation.
- Second, God is holy morally: He is pure, undefiled, and hates sin.

When we studied the doctrine of man, we learned that by nature all of humanity “in Adam” is characterized as sinful – by nature and choice – polluted, and defiled. Since this is so, all people are by nature in a state of condemnation before their holy Judge.

It is only in light of the fact that God is holy and we are not that Job’s question makes any sense to us: how can we, who *are* darkness (Eph. 5:8) approach the holy Judge of the earth, who “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16)?

Or, in the words of the Psalmist, how can we as sinners stand with any confidence before the holy throne of God Almighty?

“If You, O LORD, were to keep track of sins, O Lord, who could stand before You?” (Psa. 115:3, NET)

This is the very dilemma that the apostle Paul systematically unpacks in Romans, his *magnum opus*.

His answer to the question of Job and the Psalmist is that the only way it is possible for us as sinners to find pardon and forgiveness, welcome and acceptance, confidence and boldness before this thrice Holy and Triune God is by being justified through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Since “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against *all* ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (1:18), Paul, as an apostle of Jesus Christ finds himself “under obligation both to Greeks and Jews” (1:14) because all – both Greeks and Jews – have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory (3:23), and thus stand condemned before the bar of His perfect justice (cf. 8:1). The wages their sin has earned is eternal death (6:23a), and the only way “out” says Paul is to receive – by faith – God’s gracious gift of eternal life “in Christ” (6:23b). This gift is offered in the gospel – the declaration of what God has done for helpless sinners in the divine person and perfect sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ (1:16; cf. 1:3-4).

It must be this way, for as sinners who are by nature “in Adam” (5:12-21), we are incapable of the perfect obedience God requires to be declared righteous before Him (3:19-20). This is why Paul is so eager to preach the gospel wherever the Spirit leads him (1:15): “the gospel reveals a righteousness of God – *the* righteousness that God requires” (1:17)¹² for us to stand before him as “just.” Apart from Christ’s perfect righteousness imputed to us by faith, there is no peace between us and God (5:1), for apart from our union with Christ we are “enemies” with God (5:10). As weak and helpless sinners (5:6), we needed a Surety to do for us what we could not do for ourselves: by justified by His blood [i.e. death], and thus saved from God’s just and holy wrath (5:9). Because justification is by faith alone in Christ alone, our rejoicing (5:2) and boasting is in God alone (4:2).

¹² The 1984 NIV translates the Greek phrase δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ (*dikaiasunē theou*) as “*a* righteousness of God.” This is grammatically correct for there is no definite article (i.e. “the”). However, other translations are certainly correct for translating the phrase as “*the* righteousness of God”, for the context of the whole letter shows that Paul is contrasting two “kinds” of righteousness: one by works of the law, and one by hearing with faith (cf. Gal. 3:2, 5). Since the “righteousness” by works of the law is impossible for sinners, we must receive “another” righteousness – one that is perfect – if we are to be declared righteous before God: one which is merited by Christ and imputed to us by faith alone.

The Definition of Justification

As virtually all scholars agree, the Hebrew and Greek words used for justification are forensic terms.¹³ That is, they belong to sphere of law and most often depict the imagery of defendants standing before a judge in the courtroom.

That is, a righteous judge, based on the evidence presented, either declares the defendant to be guilty/condemned or innocent/just.

- Deut. 25:1-2 – “If there is a dispute between men and they come into court and the judges decide between them, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty, then if the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence with a number of stripes in proportion to his offense.”

An unrighteous judge does exactly the opposite:

- Prov. 17:15 – “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD.” (cf. Isa. 5:23)

Clearly, the Hebrew term¹⁴ in these verses means to make a judicial declaration.

So too is this seen in the NT:

- Luke 7:29 – “When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just.”¹⁵

Here the declaration is made that God’s moral character is in conformity with the law.

In Paul, the Greek word means to declare forensically that the demands of the law as a condition of life are fully satisfied with regard to that person:

- Gal. 2:16 – “We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”

¹³¹³ For example, see Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 510-11.

¹⁴ I.e. the hiphil of צָדַק (tsadaq).

¹⁵ Literally, “they justified God.” NLT = “All the people agreed that God’s way was right.”

Now, because we are inherently sinful and thus objectively sinners, God's justice is not our friend. No amount of doing "right" can undo the wrongs we've committed. Trying our hardest to keep the law cannot erase the fact that we have broken the law.

- Gal. 3:10 – "For all who rely on the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'"
 - This is why it is "evident" in the next verse (3:11) that "no one is justified before God by the law."

God's law does not "justify" us. Rather, its ministry is to condemn us:

- Gal. 3:19a – "Why then [was] the law [of Moses added]? It was added because of transgressions."¹⁶
- Rom. 4:15, NLT – "For the law always brings punishment on those who try to obey it. (The only way to avoid breaking the law is to have no law to break!)"

Since all people are by nature lawbreakers, the law is not a good "justifier."¹⁷ This is because the law declares us not as just/innocent, but as guilty/condemned.

- Rom. 7:7 – "What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'"

The law doesn't make us guilty. It declares that we are guilty. This is why God, in His grace, gave the law to His people through Moses:

- Rom. 5:12-14 – "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all people because all sinned – for sin indeed was in the world before the law [of Moses] was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses."

¹⁶ NLT – "Why, then, was the law given? It was given alongside the promise to show people their sins."

¹⁷ This is why Paul says in Romans 3:20, "By works of the law no flesh will be justified in [God's] sight." Literally, Paul uses the word "all", reminding us that "all" people – whether Jews or Gentiles – are "of the flesh", and thus law-breaking, God-hating sinners. *This* is why no one can be made right with God by law-keeping!!

The law is meant to drive sinners to God's grace.

- This is why the law also provided a means of forgiveness through an atoning sacrifice.

In the new covenant, God's grace has been fully and finally revealed in the person and work of Christ:

- John 1:17 – “For the law through Moses was given; the grace and the truth through Jesus Christ was given.”¹⁸

This is why Paul preaches the gospel of – the Good News about – Jesus Christ: guilty and helpless sinners can be justified by God Almighty through believing God's promise of deliverance in His Son.

Imputation of Christ's Righteousness through Union with Christ's Person

If we are inherently and actually sinners before a holy God, how can this holy God declare us to be innocent and just? Are the charges of the Roman Catholics – namely that the Protestant view of justification by faith creates a legal fiction – true?

¹⁸ This is a literal translation of the Greek, which highlights and emphasizes the superiority and finality of Jesus' ministry versus the inferiority and temporal nature of Moses' ministry (cf. 2 Cor. 3; Hebrews).